

Travel Safe. Travel Secure.

Tips for protecting yourself and your personal property while you are traveling.

Before you leave home:

Whether you're traveling for business or pleasure, it might seem like there are a lot of people trying to separate you from your personal property while you travel. In fact, the professional thief is easily identified.

Travelers generally encounter distraction thefts. The traveler might experience the loss of items such as: briefcase, laptop computer, wallet or purse with money and credit cards, passport, tickets, keys, cellular phone, and clothing.

These criminals frequently work at major national and international airports. These crimes most often occur during holidays and busy travel seasons, perhaps because there are more victims from which to choose. Crimes against travelers occur most frequently at airports, in hotels, and at car rental companies.

Who is the enemy?

Distraction thieves usually blend in with the surrounds. He or she looks like a typical casual or business traveler. But these thieves are often highly trained and experienced in crime.

Areas of distraction:

There are thieves who specialize in every area of the airport, train terminal or bus station.

1. Shuttle buses

The thief activity known as "working the loop." The criminal will ride on shuttle buses from stop to stop, usually early morning or late afternoon when the bus is busy and crowded. Or, the thief will pull up beside the bus when it stops at each entrance and take luggage out of a rear storage area while the driver is distracted with another traveler.

On buses on which luggage is stored inside, the thief will just get on and steal luggage when he/she gets off.

Solution: *Watch the luggage areas.*

A thief may sit beside you; unfold a newspaper, which will overlap your carry on items, and pickpocket from bags under cover of the newspaper.

Solution: *Keep carry on items within your reach at all times, with your hand over the opening flap or clasp.*

On buses or shuttles where passengers hold on to ceiling straps, wallets/purses are stolen via the bump and lift trick. The thief will "accidentally" bump into the victim then easily pick the victim's pocket or take their purse.

Solution: *Put a rubber band around your wallet, this will make it cling to the fabric of the pocket and snag on cloth. Keep a hand on the body of a purse, not just the strap.*

2. Curbside and skycap check-in areas

Luggage is often taken from the skycap cart, "Oh I forgot something in my bag..."

Solution: *Tip the skycap to buy their respect. Watch your bags go into the system, insist if necessary. Make sure the destination code tag is correct.*

Damage to luggage most often occurs to the wheels, cuts in fabric, and loss of handle and/or tags. If the whole bag is "lost" or stolen, you will need to be able to positively identify it or tell the airline how to route it to you. Pack an assortment of items in each bag such as some shoes, clothing, and personal care items. If a bag is lost, you aren't without a whole category of items.

Solution: *Put an itinerary inside the bag so the airline can trace you if bag is recovered. Put owner information inside the bag. Use business address and phone number only. NEVER use private home contact information.*

3. *Ticket counters*

Teams of thieves might use the stall and dip method of robbery. They work on emotion trying to engage you in comment, conversation, ask for suggestions, directions, or involve you in an “accident.” One or two team players distract you while a third makes the theft.

Solution: Be alert to your surroundings.

Don't get distracted by incidents or people.

4. *Screening stations (x-ray machines)*

Victims are profiled, usually during busy times. A team of suspects works at a screening station. One or more of the team may cut in front of the victim. One of them might delay from the front of the line, often by dropping things, usually coins. A third then picks up the victims bag and either carries it away, or places it in his own opened bag, which covers it up, and he then walks away.

Carry-on theft victims, the “targets”, usually look like they have money, often carry laptops, and might flash a thick wallet or credit cards.

Solution: Carry as few credit cards as possible, be alert to distractions. If you're traveling with a companion, form your own relay team to handle your belongings.

5. *Waiting areas*

Gate area: The thief might use the bump and pickpocket crime. He/she looks for the victim with a bulging wallet pocket. The thief might “accidentally” bump into the victim, cut a hole with a razor blade and remove the wallet, or just pick the pocket. The thief might cut purse strap with a razor blade, and allow the purse to fall into a shopping bag the thief is carrying. The victim's belongings then become disguised and may easily be handed off to another member of the crime team.

Solution: Few credit cards, keep hand on purse, be aware of being bumped into or touched.

Phone bank: People on the telephone often become distracted by the phone call they're making. The traveler might then become a victim by losing their carry-on items, or a victim to shoulder surfing, the theft of a phone credit card number as the thief watches from a nearby phone and repeat numbers to a second person on another phone.

Or, the thief might watch from a second floor and get the number, or they might videotape your hand motions on the keypad and later determine the numbers dialed. This thief is usually 16 to 30 years old, casually dressed, and stands unusually close to the victim.

Solutions: Keep luggage in sight and be alert to anyone in your immediate area. Shield or cover the keypad when dialing credit card information.

6. *Restrooms*

Items placed on the floor may be stolen from under the divider. Or, the thief might reach over the top and steal a purse or hanging items from the door.

Solution: Use the stall next to a solid wall. Place your parcels between you and the wall, or place item between your feet. Do NOT use the door hook.

7. *On board aircraft*

A suspect will feign looking for something in his luggage, either in an overhead storage bin or under your seat, while he/she is actually going through your carry-on items.

Solution: On aircraft with a two by two configuration, and any other aircraft when possible, use the storage bin on opposite side of the aircraft so you can keep your items in sight when the bin is open.

If you are sitting by the bulkhead, a thief can go through your bags from the seat behind yours.

Solution: Do not store anything of value under your seat.

8. Escalators

A team of suspects surrounds the profiled victim. One causes a distraction such as dropping something, getting stuck, or just stopping at the end of the escalator so everyone else bumps into one another. The person following the victim will pickpocket.

Solution: Be attentive and aware of your surroundings and your belongings.

9. Baggage claim

It has been said there are two types of luggage: Lost and carry on. Many baggage claim areas no longer require identification to claim luggage. So thieves can easily remove luggage from the carousel and walk away. If claiming a larger piece of luggage distracts a victim, the thief might take a smaller unattended carry-on.

Solution: Be aware of property at all times at the airport, hotels and rental car companies.

Distraction stunts:

The thief might use these stunts whenever they want to draw the victim's attention away from his carry on items, and away from the thief's actions. These stunts include:

Violence distraction: A team of thieves may give the appearance of domestic violence. They might fight or stage an accident such as falling or dropping things. The suspects might attempt to engage the victim in conversation, ask a question, or make a comment while a team member takes the victim's belongings.

Stain distraction: A suspect might point out a real or imagined stain. If real, the thief probably applied it! They will create the stain, and then offer to clean it off while a teammate steals the carry-on item. Kids might be involved in distractions. Situations might and often do seem strange or unusual.

Solution: Be attentive and aware!

Hotel Safety:

Crimes of battery and robbery occur even in upscale or national chains because the luxury of the surroundings suggest guests have property of value.

Crimes in and around hotels are described in terms of their frequency, where they occur and what crime is committed:

61 percent in guest rooms

(property usually taken)

18 percent in parking lots

(robbery/assault)

10 percent in hallways

(luggage taken off carts)

6 percent in bars (pickpockets)

5 percent in lobbies

(luggage taken off carts)

Checking In:

Use a first initial only not your full name. Give as little information as possible. Use business contact information rather than a home address and phone number. NEVER use a social security number.

Room Preference:

Avoid a room on the ground floor, one facing a parking lot, a room on the second floor facing parking lot or climbable trees or other access. Each of these rooms is easily accessed from the outside and often in secluded areas where thieves can come and go easily and relatively unobserved.

Door Security:

Magnetic strip cards offer the best security feature. The card is computer activated and the code is usually changed or cancelled at check out. If the card key is lost or stolen, the desk can cancel the old card and issue a new one.

In The Elevators:

Take a moment to see who is already on the elevator before you get in. If “something’s not right”, don’t worry about offending someone. Just take a different elevator.

Luggage:

Be alert to the thief who might read your name on a luggage tag, start a conversation with you to distract you so a second person can take your bags. Use covered luggage tags or turn personal information to the under side. Be cautious of unusual conversation from strangers who might attempt to get personal information from you such as your home address or if you are traveling alone.

Your Room:

When you check in, look into all areas while the bellhop is still there or while the door is open. Take a look at your phone and know the code to dial out for help, including 911 or an emergency number outside of the hotel. Hotel security might respond when they have time, not when you need them in an emergency. ALWAYS double lock door even when you’re in the room. NEVER open the door to a stranger unless you’ve verified his identity with the desk. Hotel security, maintenance, and housekeeping personnel will understand your caution. If the “front desk” calls to indicate there is a gift available for you and asks when you want it delivered, tell them you will pick it up. NEVER open the door unless you’re sure who you’re letting in.

In The Hallway:

During the evenings a thief might “work the hallway.” They will follow the maid at bed turn down time, to look into rooms where they might see laptops or briefcases left on the table. The suspect might go into room saying, “Oh I forgot this,” and leave with your property.

Travel Safe. Travel Secure.

With a little practice at increasing your awareness of your surroundings, you’ll easily master the survival tricks of travel. Bon voyage!